

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH BRIGADIER GENERAL
MICHAEL NEVIN, COMMANDING GENERAL, 177TH MILITARY POLICE BRIGADE,
JOINT TASK FORCE 134 VIA TELECONFERENCE FROM IRAQ TIME: 10:33 A.M. EST
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CHARLES "JACK" HOLT (chief, New Media Operations, OASD PA): So we can get
started.

Brigadier General Mike Nevin, commanding general of the 177th Military Police Brigade,
Joint Task Force 134. Thank you, sir, for joining us this morning for the bloggers roundtable.

Do you have an opening statement for us, sir?

GEN. NEVIN: Yes. As you know, we're over here overseeing detention operations, and part
of that -- we do a lot of work with juvenile detainees. We're seeing that the terrorists here are
preying on juveniles, and they'll continue to prey on the juveniles unless these juveniles are given
an opportunity to -- given opportunities that outweigh the messages and the inducements that
they're getting from the insurgents. Our juvenile education center that we've had open up here
provides basic fundamentals, basic skills that they need to regain hope and give them some
encouragement for success in their future after release.

The majority of these juveniles want to be educated, and they're showing us that they have
ability and willingness to learn. And they do participate actively in class, and often the classrooms
look just like any classroom anywhere in the world. And the kids are paying attention,
participating, and our education program is led by local Iraqi professional teachers and producing
good results.

We're trying to encourage the communities in Iraq here to provide opportunities for these
juveniles upon release, and it's imperative in the fight to keep them from coming back to -- go back
to their old ways after their release. Family participation and visitation is key. We have monthly
visits. Family members are able to come in and meet with the juveniles. They encourage them, tell
them it's very important for them to get an education, take advantage of the opportunities that we're
affording them.

And the family here in Iraq is highly valued and is really the foundation, a building block, for the society.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir.

And let's see, Jarred, why don't you get us started this time around?

Q Okay, thank you, sir.

Could you tell us -- we're seeing a lot of the security improvements back here in the States, in the media, starting to filter through. Could you talk a little bit about your on-the-ground experiences, about the increasing professionalism of the security forces, and the interactions between the different levels of Iraqi society?

GEN. NEVIN: Well, not very much. That's kind of far afield from our focus here.

But I can say that the security situation in the country is noticeably better. We've been here since July. And when we were first on the ground in July, the first three convoy movements that I had out in the countryside there, we had some kind of an encounter with an insurgent force on those first three moves, three for three. But we haven't had any encounter like that since. The theater internment facilities that we have have also had a tremendous downturn in violence. The programs that we've put in place there have yielded tremendous results in reducing violence between the different religious sects, and also facilitated reconciliation efforts in the country.

MR. HOLT: Okay, Andrew.

Q General, good afternoon. Andrew Lubin from Military Observer. Appreciate you taking the time to talk with us today, sir.

GEN. NEVIN: You're welcome.

Q Thank you.

Could you talk to us a bit about the juveniles? What age group are they? Are you looking at juveniles who were 12 to 14, 17 to 19? Are we talking hoodlums or just kids who are kind of getting in the wrong direction? GEN. NEVIN: Well, the juvenile population is anybody that's under age 18. And if they're detained, they're detained as a security detainee, meaning that they posed an imperative security risk to the government of Iraq or to coalition forces.

The population we have right now there's about 900 juveniles in coalition custody, and of them, 90 percent of them are ages 15, 16 or 17. We've taken in juveniles as young as eight -- or nine, excuse me, but he was quickly released. He was injured and we nursed him back to health and released him back to his mother. As a rule, we don't get very many that are below age 13 or 14, but most of them are 15, 16 or 17.

Q Well, are they doing this because they're Vinny Soprano (sp) wannabe's or are they doing this because they've got some sort of twisted religious belief that they're doing a good thing for Islam?

GEN. NEVIN: Well, very few of them have any kind of ideology whatsoever. Most of them or the vast majority of them were induced into this behavior with money that -- someone offered them money to perform an act, and then they build on that, give them some weapons, give them some military-like things to encourage them, make them feel they're powerful and part of something. They've got this secret that -- secret life that they're leading. They make it very exciting and make it like it's -- sounds like it's a very popular thing and that they're going to be with a bunch of brothers that are doing this heroic and exciting thing.

It starts with money, and they try to really set the hooking and keep these juveniles on their side.

Q With that, though -- General, do you mind if I continue?

MR. HOLT: Go ahead.

Q Okay. Sir, that brings us over to the question on the guarantors and the family part of it, which sounds like a really good concept. If the family -- if the guarantor program works -- and General Stone says it does and we believe him -- then how do they get the message to getting to be, you know, a punk in the first place; or how do they get brought back into not being punk, I guess, might be a more positive way to ask?

GEN. NEVIN: Well, the initiation part there it's kind of a, I guess, a worldwide thing. There are a lot of broken families over here torn apart, and when you've got a broken family you wind up with children, juveniles that are at risk and they're easily exploited. And the money is very powerful. And part of what we do -- I think the time that a juvenile spends in our facility gives them a chance to -- remember what a normal life is like and refocus a little bit. They kind of have a cooling off period, and the reconnecting with the family helps also. And while they're here, they're getting their education, they're getting their fundamental reading and writing and things that will help them be able to think for themselves, and we give them an opportunity to think about the world, expose them to some different ideas that they can apply to life afterwards; that they get the idea that there is going to be a future, that the war will be over; that the communities will be stronger and families will be intact again; and that the right way for Iraq is for them to be part of that positive future.

Q Yeah, because actually you think about it, any kid who's 19 or younger, all he's known is Desert Storm and sanctions and then OIF. So they've never really seen a normal life, have they?

GEN. NEVIN: Well, you could make a generalization like that about the whole country, but it's really very specific, region by region. And there's a whole history of inequality under Saddam's rule and all kinds of issues that have sprung up from the war and the reconstruction efforts and that. But certainly, since al Qaeda has come in and tried to penetrate the segments of society -- and they're the ones that initiated the sectarian divide. There was no sectarian divide in this country

until al Qaeda, very cowardly attack on the Golden Mosque, and tried to blame that on one sect versus the other. They really get credit for deconstruction of Iraqi society.

Q Okay, fair enough.

Jared -- can I go one more?

MR. HOLT: Yep.

Q Okay. (Inaudible.) Do you with part of -- a major part of your program being -- giving them something to do once they're released, are you working pretty closely with the different PRT programs to make sure -- or try and get these kids jobs when they come out?

GEN. NEVIN: We're starting to get into that now. General Stone has begun a program trying to tie all of this together. While we're trying to teach basic education and some job skills, we want to expand on our job skills training to give them more opportunities for the future, and then we start in the spring here to reach out into the provinces and communities to try and tie these guys to job opportunities and a better life on the other side. And it all starts with the education process here in facility.

MR. HOLT: Okay, great. Thank you very much.

Jared, back to you, finally.

Q Yeah. If you could talk a little bit about -- I saw a report that the good thing that's happening is that within the prisons or the detainment centers, some of the least violent people are pointing out more of the al Qaeda people, and then that allows you to then segregate the hardcore from the softcore. Are you seeing that, that it's -- that we're able to keep track of who the real bad guys are who we can never let out versus the people that we want to let out to try to improve the Sunni opinion of the coalition forces?

GEN. NEVIN: That's happening on a regular basis in there. They really do self-select. They point each other out. And the most recent example of that was very interesting. Now, there are quite a few Takfiri and they're very fundamental and very extreme viewpoints. We have quite a few of those in the detention centers. But we had a group of Takfiri, just a week ago asked for three people to be removed from a compound because they said these three are al Qaeda and they are conducting recruiting activities and we don't like them. We want a different future here. We don't agree with the al Qaeda view. They're political, and Takfiris are really more apolitical, and they singled out these three al Qaeda recruiters.

And that's just the most recent example. But our moderates within the compound are doing great things, and they're participating voluntarily in all of our education programs and our work programs, and they're demonstrating by their behavior change that they're no longer a security risk, and that because they did it for the money one time, if they have an opportunity to make an honest living, they're no threat to society.

MR. HOLT: Okay. And General, if I could, could you speak a little bit in kind of the macro sense, in the overall, of how the role of the detention operations are -- is playing the part in our counterinsurgency strategy?

GEN. NEVIN: Well, in one very close-in situation or way, our facilities are a microcosm for the country overall. We have in close proximity people of different religious sects and different political ambitions and viewpoints, and we're working to give them a chance for reconciliation, we're working to identify the ones that are contrary to coalition efforts, and we're empowering the moderate voices to drown out the extremists. And that's pretty much what's going on in the overall country. The same efforts are being exercised by the multinational forces and the coalition forces that are out in the communities.

MR. HOLT: Thank you, sir. Anyone else? Any follow-up questions?

Q Yes, about the Islamic clerics. General, are you having difficulty getting enough in, or are the moderate clerics kind of rodgering up and coming to you? How do you attract these guys?

GEN. NEVIN: We have a recruiting effort going on outside in the Baghdad and the surrounding area, and we have plenty of them that have signed up and come in. We've had them for quite some time coming in as volunteers, and only recently established a contract with some of them to formalize their efforts and give them a regular lesson plan and ask them to come in and do the guided group discussions, religious discussions.

They represent all the sects of Islam. They bring in a variety of experience. Some of them are young guys and very charismatic. Some of them are very scholarly types that you can tell that they have a lot of experience and wisdom, and are great group leaders with a tremendous amount of experience.

Q Great. What's the response of the juveniles and maybe the kids in their early twenties when they go in there and they find a mullah or cleric telling them, in effect, what they've heard has been wrong? That must be quite an eye-opening experience for them.

GEN. NEVIN: Well, it is. And the whole approach in the religious discussion is basically, well, guys, you know how to read, so let's sit down and let's read the Koran and read it out loud and listen to it, and what do you think that means? What does that say to you? And everybody gets to talk and discuss it. And the imams emphasize what is not in the Koran as much as they emphasize what's in there to make sure that everyone comes away with an understanding that killing innocent people is not something that is condoned by the Koran; that women and children are deserving of protection; and that violence is not an authorized approach or technique in the -- by the Koran. They give them a well-rounded experience and let them do a lot of discussion amongst themselves, but guide their discussions appropriately.

MR. HOLT: And sir, are the imams also the ones teaching the other, say, general education classes? Or where do you get the teachers for those?

GEN. NEVIN: We have teachers that have been in the Iraqi school system and other countries and other school systems, and they are teachers, and they do the instruction. They teach the basic curriculum: math, science, reading, writing, geography, civics. And they have a very set of curriculum with a set of semesters. We've got our juveniles broken out appropriately by their skill levels, and the education programs are aimed at the appropriate skill levels. There's testing and certification at the end of the semesters to demonstrate mastery of tasks, and they get report cards, and it becomes a pass- fail thing, and the report cards are a very popular discussion in family visitations.

MR. HOLT: Excellent.

Any other follow-up questions?

Q General, Andrew Lubin again. Would it be possible to get a picture or two or three of some of the imams teaching classes or some of the juveniles? Because this is something that really very few people in America know or understand about.

GEN. NEVIN: Well, we have a very restrictive photo policy based on the Fourth Geneva Convention, that prohibits any detained person from becoming an object of public curiosity. So that's pretty difficult to do.

And as far as our imams and teachers, that would be a case-by- case basis if they were willing to do that on their own time to show their likenesses or that. And we don't -- of course, our facilities are very secure. We don't allow any cameras or video or recording devices inside our facilities.

Q Okay. Fair enough. And I appreciate the honest answer. Then I'll -- we won't worry about that.

MR. HOLT: All right.

Well, general, do you have any closing thoughts, closing statements for us?

GEN. NEVIN: Well, I want everybody to know that this is kind of groundbreaking work that we're doing here; that when we took a look at the whole circumstance of what was going on in detention, what was going on in the country, and that we realized very quickly that these individuals in the facilities were going to get out someday, that they would be returning to Iraqi society, and that we had better do something to prepare them for that eventuality; that just warehousing them and making sure that they stayed out of the fight while they were with us was not good enough, that we owed it to the citizens and the government of Iraq here to try and do something to take an edge off them, expose them to more moderate ideas, give them some different points of view about the world, and prepare them for reconciliation first and then reintegration back into society when they're ready. And so far, we think what we're doing is working.

We want to do more of it. We want to try some new things with more education and job training and hook them up with some kind of guaranteed job on the other side for them so that we know without a doubt they won't take the money, they won't be tempted by somebody offering them \$50 for a very simple thing just this one time or any of those other catch phrases that they use on them. If we can do all of those things, I think, we might just be reinventing a significant portion of warfighting.

MR. HOLT: It is groundbreaking work, sir, and I thank you very much for being with us.

Brigadier General Michael Nevin, commanding general of the 177th Military Police Brigade, Joint Task Force 134, thank you, sir. And I'm hoping that a few weeks down the road, we may be able to check back with you and have an update.

GEN. NEVIN: It would be my pleasure, and you're very welcome.

MR. HOLT: Thank you, sir.

Q General, could you stay on a second, please. I've got one more question for you, please.

GEN. NEVIN: Sure.

Q Are you still there, sir?

GEN. NEVIN: Yes.

Q Great. I'm going to be embedding -- I'm going to be coming over again in the middle to the end of January. Would it be possible for you to come down and spend a few days with you and General Stone and maybe go out to tour the facility?

GEN. NEVIN: Oh, absolutely. You get yourself over here, and we'd be happy to give you a briefing and give you a look at the inside, and you can see how we've laid out our classrooms, our instruction. And you can see how we've identified the extremists, we've kept them away from the moderates and you can see how we're progressing with getting the right people released at the right time and back into society.

Q Oh, that would be spectacular. And sir, the way I work is there anything I would write you'd see before it went out, which is probably one of the reasons I get invited back a lot. But yeah, that's -- that would be -- I've been looking forward to coming over. And we've talked to General Stone a couple of times, and you had quite a story there that very few people know about it.

GEN. NEVIN: Well, we would -- we'd be happy to host you over here and give you a chance to see what we're doing and hear what you think about it.

Q Excellent, sir. Thank you. I look forward to seeing you in about probably -- between a month and five weeks.

GEN. NEVIN: Wonderful. We'll be here. Q Excellent, sir. Thanks again.

END.